

Agenda Item 4.2

Special Species Sessions

Lagenorhynchus species

Information Document 4.2c

**Catches of Dolphins in the Faroe Islands
to be Reviewed**

Action Requested

Take note

Submitted by

Denmark



UTTANRÍKIS- OG MENTAMÁLARÁÐIÐ

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND CULTURE

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

Catches of dolphins in the Faroe Islands to be reviewed

October 2021

The unusually large catch of 1423 white-sided dolphins on Sunday 12 September 2021 has led to discussions in the Faroe Islands about continued catches of this species. The pod of dolphins was more than three times larger than any pod of dolphins previously driven and beached in the Faroe Islands. This resulted in difficulties once the pod had reached the bay, and the time to kill all the dolphins in the pod was longer than would be the case with a smaller catch. The entire catch was distributed for food among the participants in the catch and the communities in the local area.

As a result of this unusually large catch, the Government has decided to launch an evaluation of the regulations, organisational procedures and methods used in the utilisation of white-sided dolphins for food in the Faroe Islands.

The pilot whale hunt, also known as “grind,” has for centuries been an integral part of Faroese food culture. Historically, catches of Atlantic white-sided dolphins have not been as frequent or regular as those of pilot whales. Utilisation of dolphins is currently governed by the same legislation as that which applies to pilot whale drives, and like pilot whales, catches of white-sided dolphins are also considered sustainable.

Faroese whaling in context

As a large ocean nation, the Faroe Islands have a strong commitment to United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 14 – to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. The Government of the Faroe Islands underlines the right and responsibility of the Faroese people to utilize the resources of the sea sustainably.

Traditional means of food production from local resources are an important supplement to the livelihoods of Faroe Islanders. These include mountain grazing sheep, coastal fishing for household use, seasonal catches of certain abundant seabirds and occasional catches of pilot whales and other small cetaceans.

These food resources have enabled the Faroe Islands as an island nation to maintain a relatively high degree of self-sufficiency in food production. In the Faroe Islands it is considered both economically and environmentally responsible to make the most of local natural resources, and to maintain the knowledge required to make use of what nature provides in a harsh oceanic environment.

Pilot whales and other small whales represent one of few local sources of meat that does not have to be imported from afar. The meat from each whale drive provides valuable food which is distributed for free in

the local communities where the whale drives take place. This is protein that would otherwise have to be imported from sources in other countries.

The Faroese pilot whale drive

Many different species of whales and dolphins occur in the waters around the Faroe Islands, most of which are protected by law. The commonly occurring pilot whales (*Globicephala melas*) are taken for their meat and blubber in whale drives which are organised at the community level and regulated by national legislation and regulations.

The annual catch is on average 600 pilot whales, with numbers fluctuating from year to year. It has long since been internationally recognised that pilot whale catches in the Faroe Islands are sustainable and the stock of pilot whales in the Northeast Atlantic is abundant.

The Faroe Islands cooperate internationally through NAMMCO, the North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission, on the conservation of whales and the management of whaling. NAMMCO is an inter-governmental organisation which provides for political, scientific, and technical cooperation on marine mammal conservation and management in the North Atlantic.

Regular international scientific sighting surveys in the North Atlantic since 1987 have provided valuable information from which to estimate and monitor the stock abundance of different whale species. The Faroe Islands participate actively in these surveys, with comprehensive coverage across the Faroe Plateau and adjacent areas. For the latest information on the status of pilot whales in the North Atlantic, see <https://nammco.no/topics/long-finned-pilot-whale/>

Whale drives are only initiated when whales are sighted by chance close to land. The organisation of participants, both in boats and on shore, is crucial in ensuring an effective whale drive. Prevailing weather and tidal conditions will also have a bearing on whether and where a group of whales can be driven and beached. Whale drives in the Faroe Islands mainly occur from May to September.

Faroese whale drives are a dramatic sight to people unfamiliar with the slaughter of mammals. The hunts are, nevertheless, well organised, and fully regulated. Faroese animal welfare legislation, which also applies to whaling, stipulates that animals shall be killed as quickly and with as little suffering as possible.

In recent decades, dedicated measures have been taken to improve hunting methods and animal welfare in whale drives. Innovations and improvements to the equipment used in Faroese whaling have been developed on the initiative of experienced participants in the whale drive.

The most recent example is the spinal lance, which is now required equipment for the killing of pilot whales. The lance is used to sever the spinal cord of the whale, which also severs the major blood supply to the brain, ensuring both loss of consciousness and death of the animal within seconds. The spinal lance has been shown to reduce killing time to 1-2 seconds, while also improving accuracy and safety. Normally, an entire pod of whales is killed in less than fifteen minutes.

White-sided dolphins

White-sided dolphins (*Lagenorhynchus acutus*) are also a commonly occurring and abundant species around the Faroe Islands. Individual animals occasionally occur together with schools of pilot whales, while separate schools are also sometimes driven and beached, and fully utilised for human consumption. The driving and killing of dolphins in the Faroe Islands are subject to the same regulatory framework as pilot whales and must be carried out accordingly.

Until the most recent catch, the average annual catch of white-sided dolphins over the past 20 years has been around 250, although this species is not utilised as frequently or regularly as pilot whales. The Faroese catch of white-sided dolphins is also considered to be sustainable, based on the latest abundance estimate.

For the latest information on the status of white-sided dolphins in the North Atlantic, see <https://nammco.no/topics/atlantic-white-sided-dolphin/>.

The NAMMCO Committee on Hunting Methods reviews information on killing methods and equipment used in different marine mammal hunts in member countries. The Faroe Islands have reported to NAMMCO on plans to adapt the spinal lance used in pilot whale drives for use with dolphins, which are much smaller. Methods used to kill dolphins will be a part of the overall evaluation announced by the Government.

Links:

Further information on whaling in the Faroe Islands: www.whaling.fo.

The North Atlantic Marine Mammal Commission (NAMMCO): www.nammco.org